SERIAL STORY

# The Sable Lorcha

BY

**Horace Hazeltine**



SYNOPSIS.

Robert Cameron, capitalist, consults Philip Clyde, newspaper publisher, regarding anonymous threatening letters he has received. The first promises a sample of the writer's power on a certain day. On that day the head is mysteriously cut from a portrait of Cameron while the latter is in the room. Clyde has a theory that the portrait was mutilated while the room was unoccupied and the head later removed by means of a string, unnoticed by Cameron. Evelyn Grayson, Cameron's niece, with whom Clyde is in love, finds the head of Cameron's portrait caught in a tree, where it was had been used as a target. Clyde pledges Evelyn to secrecy. Clyde learns that a Chinese boy employed by Philetus Murphy, an artist living nearby, had borrowed a rifle from Cameron's lodgekeeper. Clyde makes an excuse to call on Murphy and is repulsed. He pretends to be investigating alleged infractions of the game laws.

CHAPTER V—(Continued).

At last I saw him half-way amenable to reason. Now that he was out of the shadow, I saw too, more clearly, what manner of man he was. His head, as I had already discerned it through the gloom, was abnormally large, yet not out of proportion with his herculean torso. His red hair, frowsy, unkempt, was of such abundance that, in the dark, its outline had given me a grotesquely magnified impression. His red beard, too, was thick, long, and untrimmed. What little of his face showed, was sunburned to what, in the dim light, seemed the color of ripe russet apples. His eyes were nearly indiscernible, deep set, under bushy red brows.

"If you had shown the least bit of humanity to brother men in distress," I responded, in a half jocular vein, "I'd probably never thought of this being your place, and you being you; and the incident of the morning might have been forgotten."

I thought I heard his teeth grit together in his effort to suppress a rising rage. I certainly saw his hands clench; and then, with an assumption of indifference, he took a final puff at his cigar and tossed it, sparkling, among the weeds of his lawn.

It was evident to me, now, that in spite of the nonchalance he affected, my reference to the Chinaman's poaching, and his presence at Cragholt, had aroused his interest, and so hoping to draw him out, I continued:

"Your man told the lodge-keeper that you sent him over to borrow a rifle."

"You don't mean to tell me you'd believe a Chinaman, do you?" he returned.

"It wasn't for me to believe or disbelieve. The lodge-keeper believed him."

"And so he borrowed a rifle, and then with one of Cameron's own instruments of destruction proceeded to destroy Cameron's game? Is that it? What did he shoot? A deer or one of those starved-looking white dogs that Cameron has following him about?"

Apparently Murphy knew much more of my friend than my friend knew of Murphy.

"Neither, I fancy. In fact, I'm not sure just what he did shoot in the way of game. But he seems to have indulged in a bit of target practice. He found a piece of an old portrait, tacked it to a tree, and shot holes in it. Rather silly, eh? Foolish for him to chance getting into trouble for child's play of that sort."

"How do you know that?" he growled, with an inadvertent dropping of his mask. There was no mistaking, now, that I had made captive his attention.

"I saw the target," I answered, simply.

"That's like saying, 'I caught a twelve-pound bass. Here's the hook and line to prove it.'"

"I have a scale of the bass."

"A what?"

"Something your Chinaman dropped beside the tree."

Phlegmatic though he was, something very like a start followed upon my words. Then, as if to cover the movement, he shrugged his shoulders, and chuckled ponderously.

"His visiting card, I suppose."

"Nearly as good," I supplied. "The bowl of his opium pipe."

At that moment Jerry came around the corner of the house and stopped abruptly, stupefied by surprise; for from the open mouth of the giant there issued a roar of bass laughter, that reverberated in weird discordance through the night silences.

"You bally idiot!" he cried, his guffaw ended. "I suppose no persons except Chinamen smoke opium, eh! And that being so, no Chinaman but my Chinaman could have made a target of a piece of an old portrait and dropped his pipe bowl at the foot of a tree! Go on with you, you make me sick!" And then, seeing Jerry, who had quickly joined me: "Didn't find him, eh? Well, that's not strange. Having lost the bowl of his pipe, he's probably gone to borrow another from a laundryman friend in Cos Cob; and that, by the way, is about the nearest place for you to buy gasolene."

The next day I spent at my office, in New York, busy with the hundred details that go to the making of a periodical which aims to focus popular sentiment to a righteous viewpoint concerning matters of national and social import. For the time being my consideration of Cameron and his strange problem was suspended. Now and then the subject recurred to me, dragged into the mental light on the train of Evelyn Grayson; but almost immediately it was buried beneath a question of editorial policy or a debate regarding a contract for white paper at an exortionate increase in price.

When, however, my business day was ended, and I had boarded the train for Greenwich, the whole involved enigma spread itself again before me, demanding attention. And in the midst of it, dominating it, stretching his great shadow over it to the farthest limit, appeared that frowsy red giant, Murphy, a mystery within a mystery; for, though he seemed to pervade it, there was no point at which I could discover him quite touching it.

In vain I tried to detect a real connection. I started with the letters. They bore no single characteristic mark of this uncouth creature. As an artist he might have devised the curious silhouette signature, but there was something about that—some cunning, inventive subtlety—which I could not reconcile with the ogre I had played upon, stung to anger and aroused to curiosity.

That he could either have conceived or executed the ruin of the portrait I did not believe possible. The conception, like the letters and the signature, bore evidence of a craftiness too fine for such as he; and to fancy him, mammoth that he was, stealing unobserved into Cameron's study, was to fancy the incredible.

And so, though the impression of intimate relationship persisted, I could find no point of contact, closer or more definite than through his servant's rifle practice, which after all might have been quite without motive.

There was little, therefore, in the line of reason, to convict Murphy of any knowledge of the matters which had so disturbed us. And yet, as I have said, I felt intuitively that he possessed an intimate acquaintance with the whole affair.

At the Greenwich station, I found my touring car waiting; my mother in the tonneau. My chauffeur touched his cap as I approached.

"You may drive, Francois," I said, and I took the place at my mother's side.

"You look tired, Philip," she announced when I had kissed her. "Was it very warm in the city?" Her eyes were ever quick to note infinitesimal changes in my appearance of well-being.

"Not uncomfortable," I answered, indulgently. "I had a very busy day, though. But I'm not the less fit because of it."

"We have had some little excitement here," she hastened, eager to give me the news. "Old Romney called you up on the telephone about noon. I happened to answer it, myself, and when I told him you were in New York, and would not be back until six, it just seemed he couldn't wait to unburden himself. 'Won't you please tell him, Mrs. Clyde,' he said, 'that Mr. Murphy's Chinaman was found at daybreak this morning, lying dead, just outside Murphy's back door?'"

"Dead!" I cried, in amazement.

"That is what he said. Then he added that the poor fellow's head had been crushed with some heavy instrument, and that Mr. Murphy had been arrested on suspicion and was in the Cos Cob lockup."

For a full minute I think, I sat in silent amaze. Then theories and conjectures in infinite variety gave chase, one after the other, through my excited brain. But it was more than ever difficult, I found, to reach anything like a satisfactory conclusion concerning the position the now lifeless Celestial and his accused master held in the chain of mysteries I wished so much to solve. That they were both of them more or less important links, however, I had small doubt.

"Did you know Mr. Murphy?" my mother asked. And all at once I realized that her question was a repetition, and my absorption I had not heeded the original inquiry.

"Nobody knows him," I answered, unconsciously echoing the words voiced by the man in the catboat on the previous night. "Nobody knows him. But I've met him in a rather casual way."

CHAPTER VI.

Nell Gwynne's Mirror.

With the approach of the twenty-first of the month, which is to say the seventh day following Cameron's receipt of the second letter, I observed in him a growing nervous restlessness, which with praiseworthy effort he was evidently striving to overcome. Of my visit to the red giant and the tragedy which followed it, he was, of course, informed; as he had been of the incident in the wood, including the finding of the bullet-pierced piece of canvas. Everything, save only that Evelyn was the discoverer of the portrait remnant—which I thought best under the circumstances to keep secret—was told to him in detail, and with all the circumstantiality necessary to an intelligent discussion of even the minutest point.

My description of Murphy elicited from him a recollection. He remembered having seen the man once. It was on the Fourth of July. Evelyn and Mrs. Lancaster, Cameron's housekeeper, had accompanied Cameron to what is called "The Port of Missing Men," a resort for motorists, on the summit of Titicus mountain. They had lunched there and were returning by a route which took them over a succession of execrable roads, but through some of the most glorious scenery in the whole state of Connecticut. For a while they had been following a stream, willow-girt, that went babbling down over a rocky bed which at intervals broke the waters into a series of falls and cascades. At the foot of one of these they had stopped the car and alighted for a better view, and so had come upon the unexpected.

Seated upon a great bowlder, his easel planted between the stones of the stream's shallows, was a red-headed, red-bearded Colossus, in a soiled suit of khaki and a monstrous straw hat such as is worn by harvesting farmers. Cameron told me that all three of them made bold to peep over the painter's shoulder at his work, and then, though it was of the most mediocre quality, to shower him with laudatory and congratulatory phrases.

"I can fancy how he thanked you," I broke in, smiling. "I suppose he said something very rude."

"He said nothing at all. He simply stopped painting, and turning, fixed his eyes upon me. It was as if he saw no other one of us. He seemed to be making a careful appraisement of my every feature. After a moment it grew embarrassing, and though I did not resent it—feeling rather that we, ourselves, had been in the wrong—I very speedily withdrew. To my surprise he rose from his stone seat; and, palette and brush in hand, followed us up the little acclivity to the road, watching in silence, until we got back into our car, and wheeled away."

"Did you gather from his inspection that he recognized you, or thought he recognized you?" I asked.

"I gathered only that he meant to be insufferably rude," was Cameron's answer.

"And you have never seen him since?"

"Never."

"He has evidently seen you. He spoke of the Russian wolf-hounds that go about with you."

Cameron made no response.

"Well," I added, in a tone meant to be reassuring, "I think we need have little fear of a continuance of this singular method of annoyance. Though we can't trace it directly to Murphy and his unfortunate Mongolian, I thoroughly believe that one or the other was responsible. With the Chinaman dead and Murphy in jail, the persecution will cease. The threat contained in the second letter will never be executed. See if I'm not right!"

My hope of putting Cameron at ease, however, was not rewarded. He continued to exhibit signs of an almost constant apprehension. There was, indeed, a sympathy-stirring pathos about the nervous disquiet of this man, usually so impenetrably self-contained. And at moments, in spite of me, a suspicion gripped and held that he had not been entirely frank; that somewhere in his past there was something unrevealed which might serve as a clue, if not an explanation, to the present. But these doubts of him were always transitory.

The twenty-first of September fell that year on Monday. My office demanded my presence, but I arranged affairs as well as possible by telephone and devoted the entire day to Cameron. When I told him I meant to do this he protested, pretending that he was quite without foreboding; while the unconscious tapping of his foot on the rug, even as he spoke, belied his words.

We spent the better part of the day golfing over the Apawamis links at Rye, lunching at the club house between rounds, for as a specific for nerves I have ever found that game of rare benefit. In the present instance it more than fulfilled my expectations. Cameron, apparently at least, forgot everything save his desire to out-drive, out-approach, and out-put me. And when it was over, and with sharpened appetites we drove back to Cragholt for dinner, he appeared stimulated by a new-found courage.

The day had passed without untoward event, and I felt sure that my friend was gradually coming around to my way of thinking. Neither of us mentioned the subject, but it must have recurred to him, at intervals, as it did to me. And as the hours went by without a sign, the conviction grew that Murphy, with hands tied, was fretting over the coup he was deterred from compassing.

Mrs. Lancaster, whom I have mentioned merely as Cameron's housekeeper, but who was, in addition, a distant kinswoman and acted as a sort of duenna to Evelyn, dined with us that evening, and our little partie carree seemed to me more than usually merry, owing doubtless to the relaxation of the strain which both Cameron and I had been under for the past week.

It gratified me to see my host so unfeignedly cheerful. I remember how he laughed over Mrs. Lancaster's recital of an incident of the morning.

"I had no idea," she said, "that Andrew," referring to the kennel master, "was married. He astonished me when he told me he had a wife and three children. And when I told him he did not look like a married man he seemed rather pleased than otherwise."

"It is odd," Cameron returned, "but it seems always to flatter a husband to tell him he doesn't look it." And then he laughed as though he had no care on earth.

After dinner we had the usual music, and Evelyn sang again that lyric of Baudelaire's, this time in the original French. But the melody brought back to me in vivid vision our chance meeting in the woods and all its train of circumstances.

When I had finished applauding, Cameron turned to me.

"Do you like Baudelaire?"

"I like his art," I answered, "and his frank artificiality."

"He appeals to me," Cameron confessed, "decadent though he is. I have read everything he ever wrote, I think, prose and verse. Did you ever see my copy of his 'Fleurs du Mal'? The casket is worthy of its contents. It is the most exquisitely bound little volume I ever saw. Come, I'll show it to you."

I excused myself to Mrs. Lancaster, and with pretended formality bent over Evelyn's hand, brushing it with my lips.

"Won't you be back?" she whispered.

"I hope so," was my answer. "But I can't promise."

"Oh, what a trial it is to have a selfish uncle!" she murmured as I went.

Cameron led me through the library, across the hall, and thence into his study, where he dove into a miniature book rack reserved for his favorites. After a moment of fruitless search he said:

"It isn't here. How stupid! I took it upstairs a week ago, I remember. It is in my dressing room. Do you mind coming up?"

Did I mind coming up? How glad I was to see him interested! He was more like the old Cameron than he had been at any time in the past seven days. My golf prescription had proved even more efficacious than I had dared hope.

At the risk of being tedious I must describe Cameron's dressing room. It was not large—probably 20 feet square—with three doors; one on each of the three sides. That which admitted from the passageway faced that which opened into the bath room. On the left, the third door connected with Cameron's bedchamber. On the right were two windows, giving upon an outside balcony. Between them was a fire-place.

To the left of the bath room door was the entrance to a huge closet, guarded by a heavy curtain of old rose velvet. To the right, was a stationary wash-stand, and above it a rectangular mirror, probably ten inches wide and a foot long, and very curiously framed. Across from this, against the wall which divided the room from the passage, was an enormous chiffonier, or chest of drawers. In the room's center was a round table, on which rested a reading lamp. Between the table and the fire-place was a reclining chair. Other chairs, three or four, were variously placed.

I have given these facts because they are necessary to an intelligent understanding of what I am about to relate. That in furnishing and adornment the room was plainly utilitarian is not so material. But there is one exception to this general declaration which demands to be specified. The mirror above the wash-stand possessed a distinction quite aside from its practical utility. This was by no means the first time I had seen it. Cameron had showed it to me, with a degree of pride, early in our acquaintance, explaining that it was at once a relic and an heirloom. Originally the property of Nell Gwynne, it had descended to him through three or four generations of maternal ancestors.

The glass was framed in colored beadwork, to which were attached wax figures in high relief: at the top, a miniature portrait of Charles II. in his state robes; at the bottom, one of Nell herself, in court dress. The king appeared also on the right, in hunting costume, and on the left was another figure of his favorite in less ornamental garb. According to the legend which accompanied this interesting antique, it was Nell Gwynne's own handiwork.

It possessed for me a certain fascination due more to its history than its beauty, for it was not the most artistic of creations, and as Cameron poked about for his Baudelaire, I stood gazing at the glass and thinking of all I had ever read of the illiterate, but saucy, sprightly actress whose sole claim to fame hung on her winning the favor of that easy-going, royal hypocrite, Charles II.

"Here's the binding!" I heard Cameron say, and turned from the mirror to the table, where he had found his sought-for treasure beneath a pile of heavier, grosser works.

"You know something of bookbinding," he went on, with enthusiasm. "Now examine that carefully, and tell me if you ever saw anything more exquisite. I had it done in London, last year. It's a copy of one of Le Gascon's."

At first sight it seemed all glittering gold, but on closer inspection I found that the groundwork was bright red morocco, inlaid with buff, olive, and marble leather, the spaces closely filled with very delicate and beautiful pointille traceries. It was a verittable gem in its way, and I could not blame Cameron for his raptures.

When I had applauded and bepraised to his content, he took the little volume from my hand and opening it, with a sort of slow reverence, observed with something like patronism:

"I'm afraid you don't quite understand Baudelaire."

"Does anybody?" I flung back.

"He is not so obscure as his critics would have us believe," Cameron asserted. "Sit down in that lounging chair a moment, and I'll read you something." And as I obeyed, he drew up a chair for himself, speaking all the while in denunciation of Tolstoi and the injustice of his criticism.

One poem after another he read, while I lay back listening. To his credit he read them well, though he paused often in mid-verse to explain what he thought I might regard as an affectation or, as Tolstoi has put it, "an intentional obscurity."

There was one verse which impressed me particularly as he read it, and remained with me for a long while afterward, for, in view of everything, it seemed to have a special appositiveness. The lines to which I refer have been translated in this way:

From Heaven's high balconies
See! in their threadbare robes the dead years cast their eyes,
And from the depths below regret's wan smile appears.

Cameron sat with his back to the door leading to the passageway, and facing, diagonally, across the table, the Nell Gwynne mirror. My own gaze was on him as he read.

As he finished the verse, a portion of which I have quoted, he lifted his eyes, I thought to meet mine, but his look rose over my head, and clung, while his lids widened, and into every line of his face there came a rigid, startled expression, half amazement, half horror. And in that instant of tense silence the "Fleurs du Mal" slipped from his nerveless fingers, struck the table edge, and dropped with unseemly echo to the floor.

In a breath I was on my feet and staring where his vision had focussed. I hardly know what I expected to see. I am sure nothing would have surprised me. And yet I was scarcely prepared for the inexplicable ruin which my sight encountered. The glass of the Nell Gwynne mirror was in atoms.

Cameron rose, a little unsteadily I thought, and coming around the table, joined me in closer inspection of his wrecked hereditament. I can find no word adequate to the description of what we experienced. Amazement and all its synonyms are far too feeble for the task. We were certainly more than appalled. What we saw suggested to me spontaneous disintegration. If such a thing were possible, which I believe it is not, it might have explained the condition of the mirror. No other ascription seemed admissible; for, though the glass remained in its frame not so much as a splinter having been dropped, it was fractured into a thousand tiny pieces, resembling a crystal mosaic, incapable of any but the most minute reflections. And the change to this condition from a fair, unmarred panel had been wrought without sound and seemingly without human agency.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)